

The Theology of Janus

all major Latin and Greek literary sources

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THIS IS AN INCOMPLETE EARLY VERSION OF THIS TEXT

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[Disclaimer: This collection strives for comprehensiveness, but it is the work of about a week – no doubt some things have been missed, and I have omitted many sources I regarded as insubstantial or entirely repetitive of things already included. I do not cover visual art or inscriptions, though these are no doubt vital for full understanding, but only literary sources, and I have not always sought out the most up to date text or translation. Still, as it is, this is probably the fullest representation of ancient literature about Janus that can be found.

[Translations are mine unless otherwise noted. Editions are not always indicated, as I made some of the translation in a hurry from Latin texts I had found online somewhere; all translations from Servius (auctus) are from Thilo's edition, which is in parts outdated. Hopefully I will be able to compare my translations against the best editions at a later point.

[And another disclaimer: 'Two-faced' should not be read as implying duplicitousness, but only literally.]

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1. Introduction

Although, across the Ancient Mediterranean, there were countless shrines and temples to deities known only to locals, it would be wrong to understand the polytheistic traditions of the period as autonomous units, with each people worshipping a separate "pantheon". The North African Augilae, for example, were understood by the geographer Pomponius Mela (1.46) to worship no gods at all except their own ancestors (lat. *manes*); in many cities of the Levant and Mesopotamia, gods with Arabic, Syriac, Phoenician or Babylonian names were worshipped

alongside each other, even long after some of these languages fell out of use;¹ in other cases, theonyms ('names of gods') were closely tied to a specific language, and switching languages meant switching theonyms.

This, for the most part, was the situation with the dominant bilingual culture of the Roman empire, where Greek and Latin were not so much the languages of two different peoples as the shared idioms of many different peoples for whom their own Greekness and Romanness was less a fact and more a process or an aspiration. Still, the overlap between Greek and Latin was messy; they were neither fully equivalent nor entirely complementary. A quote from Servius may illustrate this:

Most rituals (*sacra*) are in line with the character of the people in question, and most are celebrated according to their respective tradition; hymns to Liber are in Greek among the Greek-speakers (*Graecos*), Latin among the Latin-speakers (*Latinos*). Still, the hymns of Mater Deum require her own language everywhere, namely Greek. (*Commentary on Vergil's Georgics* 2.394)

So far so good; but what about gods who not only were worshipped in one language more than in the other, but who could also not easily be translated – like Liber/Dionysos or Mater Deum/Meter Theon could –, when the common expectation was that, at least for the more important gods, a translation² *should* be possible?³ Janus, with his striking iconography as a two- or sometimes four-headed older man, is perhaps the prime example of this perplexing issue, since his prominence and recognizability at Rome contrasted with the complete absence of an equivalent in Greek literature and art.

Not that there were no attempts at a translation. One glossary⁴ gives *Pýlaios* ('of-the-gates') as the Greek for *Ianus Geminus* or 'Janus the Twin'.⁵ But the god of the gates is Hermes Pylaios;—and Greek Ἑρμῆς (*Hermês*) is Latin *Mercurius*;—and Mercury is certainly not Janus. So, although Janus does indeed, among many other things, preside over doors, this translation was not really satisfactory. In the end, Greek largely simply borrowed the name as Ἰάνος (*Īanos*) or Ἰάννος (*Īannos*). But this is only the beginning of a whole series of speculations about the nature of the god in Greek and Latin literature. None of them will tell us who and what Janus *really* is; but in concert, they show the compelling, productive tension between a god's incontrovertible reality – be it social or metaphysical – and the unsolvable mystery of their nature.

This is version 1.0 of *The Theology of Janus*, published 11.03.2020.

¹ E.g. Syriac-speaking pagans usually distinguished the gods Baʿl (a native Syriac name) and Bēl (from Akkadian/Babylonian), even though in some places and times they were seen as identical or at least analogous.

² It has been fashionable to call this *interpretatio* rather than translation for the last century or so; but in the passage this usage is based on – where Tacitus talks about *interpretatio Romana* – nothing more than translation is meant. That translations are messy and do not equate to a complete equivalence of two given words is a given, and requires no special term just because theonyms are concerned.

³ It is important to note that this is not the expectation Greek- and Latin-speakers had in relation to all other languages – Egyptian theonyms, arguably the most important in the Roman empire after Greek and Latin ones, were often borrowed rather than translated. But it was the expectation for how Latin and Greek theonyms relate to each other.

⁴ The so-called *Hermeneumata Leidenisia*.

⁵ There is no Greek counterpart to *geminus* ('Twin') in the glossary, so this may be an explanatory addition to the name more than part of it. The probable translation would have been *diprósōpos* ('two-faced'), which occurs in several of the Greek-language texts that mention him.

2. Ovid introduces Janus

The fullest ancient account of Janus is found in Ovid's *Fasti* (early 1st cent. CE), a verse account of the Roman festival calendar – or rather, of its first six months. As the namesake of the first month, Janus is the main subject in the first section, on the Kalends of January (i.e. January 1st), just after a preface addressed to emperor Germanicus. The passage (*Fasti* 1.62–288) is one of the longest subsections of the entire poem. I cite it in full from the 2004 translation by A.S. Kline,⁶ with my own comments and footnotes. It begins with a short transition from the preface:

See how Janus appears first in my song
To announce a happy year for you, Germanicus.

Followed by a prayer:

Two-headed Janus, source of the silently gliding year,
The only god who is able to see behind him,
Be favourable to the leaders, whose labours win
Peace for the fertile earth, peace for the seas:
Be favourable to the senate and Roman people,
And with a nod unbar the shining temples.⁷

Which leads into a description of the holiday:

A prosperous day dawns: favour our thoughts and speech!
Let auspicious words be said on this auspicious day.
Let our ears be free of lawsuits then, and banish
Mad disputes now: you, malicious tongues, cease wagging!⁸
See how the air shines with fragrant fire,
And Cilician grains crackle on lit hearths!⁹
The flame beats brightly on the temple's gold,
And spreads a flickering light on the shrine's roof.
Spotless garments make their way to Tarpeian Heights,¹⁰
And the crowd wear the colours of the festival:
Now the new rods and axes lead, new purple glows,
And the distinctive ivory chair feels fresh weight.¹¹
Heifers that grazed the grass on Faliscan plains,
Unbroken to the yoke,¹² bow their necks to the axe.

⁶ URL: <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Fastihome.php>. “This work may be freely reproduced, stored, and transmitted, electronically or otherwise, for any non-commercial purpose.”

⁷ Referring to the ceremonial unlocking and opening of the temples.

⁸ Since the day is *fastus*, i.e. bringing new cases to court was allowed, this is apparently a reference to the belief that one should only say auspicious things, explored later on in the dialogue between Ovid and Janus.

⁹ Saffron offered as incense on the altar.

¹⁰ According to the notes of A.J. Boyle and R.D. Woodard in their translation, “[o]n January 1 the newly chosen consuls process to the Capitoline temple of Jupiter, followed by a parade of citizens. Here the senate holds its first session of the new year.”

¹¹ The crowd wears festive white; the new purple is that of the distinctive stripe on consuls' *trabea*; the rods (*fasces*) and axes are carried by the lictors (~bodyguards) who walk before the consuls. The ivory chair “is that of the *sella curulis* – special chairs [...] in which only the highest-ranking magistrates were allowed to sit.” (Boyle & Woodard).

¹² Often a requirement in sacrificial animals.

When Jupiter watches the whole world from his hill,
Everything that he sees belongs to Rome.
Hail, day of joy, and return forever, happier still,
Worthy to be cherished by a race¹³ that rules the world.

Although this ritual has little to do with Janus, the day is still frequently associated with him, and Ovid now returns to him as the main subject of the section:

But two-formed Janus, what god shall I say you are,
Since Greece has no divinity to compare with you?
Tell me the reason, too, why you alone of all the gods
Look both at what's behind you and what's in front.

After posing this question, Ovid describes the first of many fictional interactions with informants throughout the *Fasti*, in this case the god himself. His real sources are generally older texts or his own speculations and inventions, but the description of a theophany (appearance of a god) is still instructive:

While I was musing, writing-tablets in hand,
The house seemed brighter than it was before.
Then suddenly, sacred and marvellous, Janus,
In two-headed form, showed his twin faces to my eyes.
Terrified, I felt my hair grow stiff with fear
And my heart was frozen with sudden cold.
Holding his stick in his right hand, his key in the left,
He spoke these words to me from his forward looking face:

Ovid now has Janus locate himself in the genealogy of Hesiod's *Theogony* (see lines 115–116), arguably the single most authoritative text on the gods. As the god presiding over beginnings, he fittingly claims to be the first of the gods:

'Learn, without fear, what you seek, poet who labours
Over the days, and remember my speech.
The ancients called me Chaos (since I am of the first world):¹⁴
Note the long ages past of which I shall tell.
The clear air, and the three other elements,
Fire, water, earth, were heaped together as one.
When, through the discord of its components,
The mass dissolved, and scattered to new regions,
Flame found the heights: air took a lower place,
While earth and sea sank to the furthest depth.

This account of the differentiation of the primordial Chaos into the elemental regions of the geocentric model of the cosmos has more to do with ancient natural philosophy than with Hesiod, though it is too vague to be identified with the teaching of any one philosophical school.

¹³ The Roman chauvinism cannot be denied and should not be underplayed, but the word used here means 'people', and does not imply anything like what the word 'race' means today.

¹⁴ An odd translation; I would put "(since I am an ancient thing)", or something to that effect (but the word for ancient, *prisca*, is different from the one for 'the ancients', *antiqui*).

And at any rate, the touch of philosophy is not introduced for its own sake, but as an *aition* (explanation of the reason/origins of something):

Then I, who was a shapeless mass, a ball,
Took on the appearance, and noble limbs of a god.
Even now, a small sign of my once confused state,
My front and back appear just the same.

As is often the case in the *Fasti*, and generally in ancient “theological” writing, Ovid (still in Janus’ voice) gives multiple explanations for one and the same thing:

Listen to the other reason for the shape you query,
So you know of it, and know of my duties too.
Whatever you see: sky, sea, clouds, earth,
All things are begun and ended by my hand.
Care of the vast world is in my hands alone,
And mine the governance of the turning pole.¹⁵
When I choose to send Peace, from tranquil houses,
Freely she walks the roads, and ceaselessly:
The whole world would drown in bloodstained slaughter,
If rigid barriers failed to hold war in check.¹⁶
I sit at Heaven’s Gate with the gentle Hours,¹⁷
Jupiter himself comes and goes at my discretion.¹⁸
So I’m called Janus. Yet you’d smile at the names¹⁹
The priest gives me, offering cake and meal sprinkled
With salt: on his sacrificial lips I’m Patulcius,
And then again I’m called Clusius.²⁰
So with a change of name unsophisticated antiquity
Chose to signify my changing functions.

A third *aition* (explanatory account):

I’ve explained my meaning. Now learn the reason for my shape:
Though already you partially understand it.
Every doorway has two sides, this way and that,
One facing the crowds, and the other the Lares:²¹

¹⁵ The poles (*cardines*) of heaven often stand for the entire heaven, but in light of Janus’ power over doors, there may be a pun on the meaning ‘hinge’ here.

¹⁶

¹⁷ The goddesses called Horae or ‘Hours’ should probably be understood as the four seasons in this case. See Servius, *On Aeneid* 7.607 on page [undetermined].

¹⁸ This is an unusual claim to make about Janus, and its rhetorical effect relies on its unexpectedness. See note [undetermined].

¹⁹ This implies that the type of divine name that would later be so much ridiculed by Christian authors – i.e. those with transparent meaning but often odd formation and used mostly by ritual specialists – already had an awkward, old-timey ring to them in Ovid’s day.

²⁰ Patulcius relating to the open, Clusius to the closed gate, from *pateo* (‘to stand open’) and *cl(a)udo* (‘to close’).

²¹ Crowds = outside, Lares (gods of the household) = inside. But Ovid in fact speaks only of the Lar in the singular here.

And like your doorkeeper²² seated at the threshold,
Who watches who goes and out and who goes in,
So I the doorkeeper of the heavenly court,
Look towards both east and west at once.
You see Hecate's faces turned in three directions,
To guard the crossroads branching several ways:
And I, lest I lose time twisting my neck around,
Am free to look both ways without moving.'

So he spoke, and promised by a look,
That he'd not begrudge it if I asked for more.

Ovid now shifts from Janus himself to his month, January, and its position in the calendar.

I gained courage and thanked the god fearlessly,
And spoke these few words, gazing at the ground:

'Tell me why the new-year begins with cold,
When it would be better started in the spring?
Then all's in flower, then time renews its youth,
And the new buds swell on the fertile vines:
The trees are covered in newly formed leaves,
And grass springs from the surface of the soil:
Birds delight the warm air with their melodies,
And the herds frisk and gambol in the fields.
Then the sun's sweet, and brings the swallow, unseen,
To build her clay nest under the highest roof beam.
Then the land's cultivated, renewed by the plough.
That time rightly should have been called New Year.'

I said all this, questioning: he answered briefly
And swiftly, casting his words in twin verses:

'Midwinter's the first of the new sun, last of the old:²³
Phoebus and the year have the same inception.'

From the month, Ovid zooms in on the day (January 1st), and on why it is *fastus* (allowing courts of law and assemblies) rather than *nefastus* (prohibiting them):

Then I asked why the first day wasn't free
Of litigation. 'Know the cause,' said Janus,
'I assigned the nascent time to business affairs,
Lest by its omen the whole year should be idle.
For that reason everyone merely toys with their skills,
And does no more than give witness to their work.'

²² The *ianitor*. That Ovid had a doorkeeper (presumably a slave?) tells us something about his and his audience's wealth. It is important to keep in mind that the picture of the "ordinary" Roman painted by the classical poets is that of a small elite of slaveholders.

²³ The reference is to the winter solstice, which occurs in late December.

And back to Janus, who is famously invoked before the other gods (like Hestia in Greek rituals):

Next I said: 'Why, while I placate other gods, Janus,
Do I bring the wine and incense first to you?'

He replied: 'So that through me, who guard the threshold,
You can have access to whichever god you please.'

And again on the day, January 1st, and on new years' customs:

'But, why are joyful words spoken on the Kalends,
And why do we give and receive good wishes?'

Then leaning on the staff he gripped in his right hand,
He answered: 'Omens attend upon beginnings.
Anxious, your ears are alert at the first word,
And the augur interprets the first bird that he sees.
When the temples and ears of the gods are open,
The tongue speaks no idle prayer, words have weight.'

Janus ended. Maintaining only a short silence
I followed his final words with my own:

'What do the gifts of dates and dried figs mean',
I said, 'And the honey glistening in a snow-white jar?'

'For the omen,' he said, 'so that events match the savour,
So the course of the year might be sweet as its start.'

Another new year's custom gives Ovid the occasion to expand on the topic of early Roman frugality compared with the contemporaneous luxury – a popular topic in Roman literature of all periods (much of which was produced by and for very wealthy men):

'I see why sweet things are given. Explain the reason
For gifts of money, so I mistake no part of your festival.'

He laughed and said: 'How little you know of your age,
If you think that honey's sweeter to it than gold!
I've hardly seen anyone, even in Saturn's reign,²⁴
Who in his heart didn't find money sweet.
Love of it grew with time, and is now at its height,
Since it would be hard put to increase much further.

Wealth is valued more highly now, than in those times
When people were poor, and Rome was new,
When a small hut held Romulus, son of Mars,
And reeds from the river made a scanty bed.
Jupiter complete could barely stand in his low shrine,
And the lightning bolt in his right hand was of clay.

²⁴ The fabled Golden Age, when human society was supposed to have been simple and egalitarian. It is typical of Ovid's style that he brings up this notion only to subvert it.

They decorated the Capitol with leaves, not gems,
And the senators grazed their sheep themselves.
There was no shame in taking one's rest on straw,
And pillowing one's head on the cut hay.
Cincinnatus left the plough to judge the people,
And the slightest use of silver plate was forbidden.

But ever since Fortune, here, has raised her head,
And Rome has brushed the heavens with her brow,
Wealth has increased, and the frantic lust for riches,
So that those who possess the most seek for more.
They seek to spend, compete to acquire what's spent,
And so their alternating vices are nourished.
Like one whose belly is swollen with dropsy
The more they drink, they thirstier they become.
Wealth is the value now: riches bring honours,
Friendship too: everywhere the poor are hidden.

And you still ask me if gold's useful in augury,
And why old money's a delight in our hands?
Once men gave bronze, now gold grants better omens,
Old money, conquered, gives way to the new.
We too delight in golden temples, however much
We approve the antique: such splendour suits a god.
We praise the past, but experience our own times:
Yet both are ways worthy of being cultivated.²⁵

Next, we turn to one of the most frequently recurring topics connected with Janus – his portrayal on an iconic type of early Roman coin. The explanation is placed in the rustic past that had just been contrasted with current times, no longer in the realm of natural philosophy or Janus' guardianship over the whole cosmos. The story of Janus' welcoming the refugee Saturn recurs in several other sources:

He ended his statement. But again calmly, as before,
I spoke these words to the god who holds the key.

'Indeed I've learned much: but why is there a ship's figure
On one side of the copper as, a twin shape on the other?'

'You might have recognised me in the double-image',
He said, 'if length of days had not worn the coin away.
The reason for the ship is that the god of the sickle
Wandering the globe, by ship, reached the Tuscan river.
I remember how Saturn was welcomed in this land:
Driven by Jupiter from the celestial regions.
From that day the people kept the title, Saturnian,

²⁵ Perhaps one of the most honest conclusions in Roman treatments of the topic of wealth and frugality: both splendor and rustic simplicity could be demonstrated for their rhetorical function by the same persons and for the same gods.

And the land was Latium, from the god's hiding (*latente*) there.
But a pious posterity stamped a ship on the coin,
To commemorate the new god's arrival.
I myself inhabited the ground on the left
Passed by sandy Tiber's gentle waves.
Here, where Rome is now, uncut forest thrived,
And all this was pasture for scattered cattle.
My citadel was the hill the people of this age
Call by my name, dubbing it the Janiculum.
I reigned then, when earth could bear the gods,
And divinities mingled in mortal places.
Justice had not yet fled from human sin,
(She was the last deity to leave the earth),²⁶
Shame without force, instead of fear, ruled the people,
And it was no effort to expound the law to the lawful.
I'd nothing to do with war: I guarded peace and doorways,
And this,' he said, showing his key, 'was my weapon.'

The next story takes place much closer to Ovid's time, when Janus is no longer ruling in Italy, but watching over it from heaven:

The god closed his lips. Then I opened mine,
Eliciting with my voice the voice of the god:

'Since there are so many archways, why do you stand
Sacredly in one, here where your temple adjoins two fora?'

Stroking the beard falling on his chest with his hand,
He at once retold the warlike acts of Oebalian Tatius,
And how the treacherous keeper, Tarpeia, bribed with bracelets,
Led the silent Sabines to the heights of the citadel.
'Then,' he said, 'a steep slope, the one by which you
Now descend, led to the valleys and the fora.
Even now the enemy had reached the gate, from which
Saturn's envious daughter, Juno,²⁷ had removed the bars.
Fearing to engage in battle with so powerful a goddess,
I cunningly employed an example of my own art,
And by my power I opened the mouths of the springs,
And suddenly let loose the pent-up waters:
But first I threw sulphur into the watery channels,
So boiling liquid would close off that path to Tatius.
This action performed and the Sabines repulsed,

²⁶ An allusion to the famous myth in Aratus' *Phaenomena*, according to which the constellation Virgo is the goddess Justice, who left the earth after the Golden and Silver Age had passed and the humans of the Bronze Age were too unjust for her to bear. Germanicus, the addressee of the *Fasti*, is the probable author of a translation of Aratus poem (under the title *Aratea*).

²⁷ On the basis of her hostility to the Trojans in the *Iliad*, Latin mythological poetry casts her as the antagonist of the Romans (the descendants of the Trojans). I do not know that the idea ever gained much currency as a historical reality, but the needs of mythological convention required opposition among the gods.

The place took on its secure aspect as before.
An altar to me was raised, linked to a little shrine:
Here the grain and cake is burnt in its flames'

With the nature of Janus, his iconography and his cult in Rome established, one question remains, which connects back to prayer and the mention of the emperor Germanicus at the beginning of the entire section:

'But why hide in peace, and open your gates in war?'²⁸

He swiftly gave me the answer that I sought:

'My unbarred gate stands open wide, so that when
The people go to war the return path's open too.
I bar it in peacetime so peace cannot depart:
And by Caesar's will I shall be long closed.'

Ovid returns from the scene of the puzzled writer asking questions of a god to the disembodied voice of an omniscient narrator:

He spoke, and raising his eyes that looked both ways,
He surveyed whatever existed in the whole world.
There was peace, and already a cause of triumph, Germanicus,
The Rhine had yielded her waters up in submission to you.

Finally, another short prayer:

Janus, make peace and the agents of peace eternal,
And grant the author may never abandon his work.

²⁸ The gates of Janus or "gates of war" are discussed on page [undetermined]. Briefly, they were a sacred building in Rome, and its gates were shut in peace, but opened when Rome entered into war – which meant, in effect, that they were almost continually open.

3. Historical accounts

While Janus had no fixed place in the genealogical system of mythological poetry – Ovid’s attempt to inscribe him in Hesiod notwithstanding –, his role in the history of Italy and the prehistory of Rome was settled from at least the time of Vergil, and perhaps much earlier, even if some historians skipped him and began their accounts after his rule, which was supposed to have been at a very early period (when gods still inhabited earth, in Ovid’s poetic phrase). A few words about the relation between myth and history are in order here.

3.1 On history and myth

For one thing, neither of them is “fiction”, generally defined in antiquity as something that did not happen but might have, such as the plots of Menander’s or Plautus’ comedies. By a threefold division, one can go on to define history (lat. *historia*) as what really did happen, and myth (lat. *fabula*) as what did not happen and could not even have happened.²⁹ A prototypical example of something mythical or fabulous would be stories about the Chimera or the Pegasus, both regarded by the majority of ancient writers that mention them as impossible beings whose existence is restricted to the human imagination.

These definitions are elegant, but in practice, they are insufficient. We may leave aside the many flaws in the distinction between fiction and history, or between fiction and myth. But even the extremes, possible and true history vs. impossible and false myth, end up bleeding into each other.

First, let us look at an example of the distinction working as it is supposed to (Servius auctus, *On Aeneid* 1.165):

Helen was seduced by Paris through the intervention of Venus, who promised to make another’s wife fall in love with him (*concilians*) as a reward for the victory (in the beauty contest against Juno and Minerva), which she had received through the golden apple. This famous myth (*fabula*) is known to all, but there is said to be a true history (*vera historia*) to it, namely that Helen was not seduced by Paris; when she did not agree to follow him to Troy while (her husband) Menelaus was absent (from Sparta), he conquered the city and took her by force.

Note that the myth in this case does not *represent* the true history – the myth’s intervention of Venus does not stand for a real seduction, but is an untrue account of something that really happened in a different way. In other cases, however, the relation is less oppositional (Servius auctus, *On Aeneid* 1.619):

There is a history to this, namely that Hercules [...] lost Hylas, who had gone to fetch water and, as the myth says, was carried away by nymphs who desired him, but as the truth (*veritas*) has it, fell into a deep spring and died.

Here the nymphs, the goddesses of the spring, symbolically stand for its water. We could translate *historia* as story or account, but it is important that, in the Roman imperial period at any rate, history is an umbrella that can include myth, whereas the reverse is not really the case;

²⁹ *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 1.13 has this division, for example, with *argumentum* as the word for fiction: “*argumentum* is an invented (*ficta*) matter”.

so it does not do to transform this into an umbrella of ‘story’ with history and myth as equal subdivisions, just because it fits with our modern preconceptions.

And the truth of a history was not always so salient in any case, though it made for a concise definition. For *grammatici* (‘grammarians, literary scholars’), at least, knowledge of history and myth was acquired in essentially the same way, by reading authorities and comparing them, and new literature would be assessed in light of that background. Accordingly, both were treated as subdivisions of the “historical part” of grammar, as Sextus Empiricus records (*Against the Professors* 1.252):³⁰

And Asclepiades, after stating in his treatise on grammar that the primary parts of grammar are three, the technical, the historical and the grammatical (which has contact with both, I mean with the historical and technical), subdivides the historical into three; for he says that “of history one division is true (*alēthē*), one false (*pseudē*), one as if true (*hōs alēthē*): the factual (*praktikēn*) is true, that of fictions (*plásmata*) and myths (*múthous*) is false, and as if true are such forms as comedy and mimes.”

And the further subdivisions of the factual and the mythical are not as we would expect (*ibid.* 253):

And of the true (*alēthoûs*), again, there are three parts: one sort is that about the persons of gods and heroes and notable men, another about places and times, the third about actions. And of false history (that is, the mythical) there is, he says, one kind only, the genealogical.

But even mythical (“false”) genealogy can be correct or incorrect (Servius, *On Aeneid* 1.834):

One should know that there were three Atlases. The first was Mauretanian (*Maurum*), who was the oldest. The second was Italian, and the father of Electra, who was the mother of Dardanus. The third was Arcadian, and the father of Maia, who was the mother of Mercury. But (Vergil) now makes an error because of the similarity of the names, and says that Electra and Maia were the daughters of the oldest Atlas.

In other words, not every untrue and impossible account is a myth; if it is felt to deviate from tradition, it falls short of being a myth. And in fact, the truth is often completely obscure to us, so that tradition is the only real criterion (Servius, *On Aeneid* 1.297):

Cicero says in the books *On the Nature of Gods* that there are multiple Mercuries; but in accounts of the gods, we must follow the myths, since the truth is unknown.

Here the rationalizing account of Cicero, which divides out contradictory traditions about Mercury into multiple Mercuries,³¹ is rejected as an innovation against the mythological tradition, rather than embraced as a closer approximation of the truth. This despite the fact that Cicero himself can be invoked as an authority alongside others when the commentary takes the space to consider a range of possibilities (Servius auctus, *On Aeneid* 4.557):

³⁰ From the Loeb Classical Library translation by R. G. Bury.

³¹ This account (*De Natura Deorum* 3.56) is not Cicero’s invention but taken over from another source. It closely resembles explanation VI in the next quotation (and is only vaguely related to explanation I, although that is attributed to him).

[Vergil has Aeneas say “whoever you are” in reference to Mercury]

[I] One should know that, according to Tully (=Cicero) in the books *On the Nature of the Gods*, there are three Mercuries: one of heaven (*superum*), one of the earth (*terrenum*), one of the underworld (*inferum*).³² So “whoever you are” is in effect ‘which of the three’; (since they)³³ say that Mercury is not of only one power nor of only one name nor of only one appearance;

[II] or because nobody knows the true names of the gods;

[III] or it rather refers to Jupiter, i.e. “whoever you are” who commands (Mercury); as in book 9 (line 22), “whoever you are that calls to arms”, when he (Turnus) has seen Iris, meaning ‘whoever has sent Iris’. This is clearly the case when Vergil says “the god is sent from the high ether”, where Jupiter (=high ether) and the celestial (*supernum*) Mercury (=the god) are meant.

[IV] but it is possible that (Aeneas) is painting a picture (? *phantasiam facere*) for his companions, and saying “whoever you are” because, although he was seeing him, he still did not know for sure that it was Mercury; which is why (Vergil) has previously said “form” and “appearance” and “was seen to speak in warning”.³⁴

[V] or “whoever you are” is in accord with pontifical usage, which uses prayers like this:

Iuppiter omnipotens, vel quo alio te nomine appellari volueris.

“All-powerful Jupiter, or by whatever other name you want to be called!”

[VI] Yet some record four Mercuries, one the son of Caelus (‘Sky’) and Dies (‘Day’), the lover of Proserpine; the second, the son of Liber Pater and Proserpine; the fourth, the son of Jupiter and Maia; the fourth the son of Cyllenius, whose mother is unknown. He secretly killed Argus, and in fear over this, he fled to Egypt, and he is said to have first invented the use of letters and numbers there. In the language of the Egyptians, he is called *Theuth*, after whom a month is named.

Both formally, in its treatment of authorities, and in its content, this is a beautiful example of what we might call skeptical gullibility: hesitation to reject any tradition, even if it seems hard to believe; but readiness to doubt them all, even if they are warranted by tradition. When an approach like this is followed, a different division of history and myth becomes more useful (Servius, *On Aeneid* 1.235):

³² This threefold distinction is not in Cicero, but it is also used elsewhere in the commentaries on Vergil, and if one is looking for it, one can conceivably read it into Cicero (*De Natura Deorum* 3.56).

³³ Really “although others”; but I think this sentence is just badly incorporated, and actually expresses the same idea as the previous one, not a different option. Unless, perhaps, we should understand the three Mercuries of the beginning as three “powers” of one god – then the positions would be distinct.

³⁴ The commentary on 4.556 says: “appropriately he says ‘form’, not ‘god’ (*deus*); because gods (*numina*) can rarely be seen as they are.”

One should know that the difference between myth and *argumentum*,³⁵ i.e. history, is that myth is the name for a matter contrary to nature, whether it took place (*facta*) or did not take place, e.g. (the story) about Pasiphae; whatever is in accord with nature is called history, whether it took place or did not take place, e.g. (the story) about Phaetra.

The examples given here are not as illustrative as one might wish, but I take the point to be this: the basic story of Phaetra, who falls in love with her stepson Hippolytus and persuades his father to kill him when she is spurned, requires no suspension of the ordinary way things work (even if some elements of the story's tellings, such as Hippolytus' death by intervention of Neptune, do). The story about Pasiphae, on the other hand, in which a human woman has sex with a bull and gives birth to the half-man, half-bull Minotaur, quite fundamentally requires a deviation from the ordinary course of things³⁶. One can either take it at face value "as the story (*fama*) goes" (Servius, *On Aeneid* 6.14):

Pasiphae, daughter of the Sun, wife of Minos the king of Crete, fell in love with a bull, and through the craftsmanship of Daedalus, she was enclosed in a cow made of wood, with the skin of a beautiful heifer wrapped around it, and so had intercourse with the bull. So, the Minotaur was born.

Or speculate about the 'true history' (ibid.):

By saying, "as the story goes", Vergil indicates that the truth (*veritatem*) is open to investigation.³⁷ For (in reality), Taurus ('bull') was a secretary of Minos, and when Pasiphae fell in love with him, she slept with him in the house of Daedalus. And because she gave birth to twins, one from Minos and the other from Taurus, she is said to have born Minotaurus, which (Vergil) indicates a little later by saying "of mixed ancestry (*genus*)".³⁸

Much more could be said about the topic, of course, but I think this suffices to show that the relation between myth, history and truth is rather complicated and context-dependent. We must now consider the context at hand: Roman historiography.

3.2 Roman historiography

It is often said that the Romans had no myths of their own, or only began to invent them in reaction to Greek mythology. This is not, I suppose, wrong entirely, but then we must apply the same standard to the Greeks. They did not simply spring into existence as a people with a unified culture – in fact, they never acquired a unified culture in antiquity at all – and local writers often had exactly the same problems as Roman authors with fitting their town's traditions into transregional frameworks like those of Hesiod, Homer or Herodotus. One of those problems was the issue of genre: in adapting an oral tradition (which may have been tied to specific places and occasions, like an annual festival) into the radically different format of written text, be it prose or poetry, specific standards and conventions had to be contended with.

³⁵ This is the word the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* uses for fiction, but it could also mean 'plot', even the plot of a mythical poem. It seems to me that explicitly offering *argumentum* and *historia* as synonyms is an indication that the twofold distinction is being made in awareness of the more common threefold one.

³⁶ This is what is meant by "contrary to nature"; Servius does *not* think in terms of natural versus supernatural.

³⁷ I.e., one cannot take the myth as is, but ought to find the truth by further inquiry (or speculation).

³⁸ Vergil surely intends *genus* as 'kind' or 'species', i.e. a combination of human and cattle.

So the issue for early Roman writers was not that of integrating native histories and/or myths into the Greek historiography and mythology, but of formulating anew something that had previously been neither history nor myth. This was the condition of writing for anyone in the Hellenistic Mediterranean who wanted their works to be read.

The rules of mythology were, despite a certain degree of flexibility at the edges, very rigid; the critiques of the likes of Plato had not led to a rejection or reform, but to a hardening of generic boundaries. To give just one example, much Greco-Roman mythological poetry retained the Homeric flat earth cosmology even as it had become entirely discredited as a scientific theory, and practically no poet of the Roman imperial period can be taken to have believed in it.

But what were the rules of history? And what, exactly, distinguished it from mythology? One view, again very elegant but insufficiently flexible in practice, was that of Varro (as described in Censorinus, *De die natali* 21):

(1) If the beginning of the cosmos (*origo mundi*) were understood by humanity, we should begin there; as it is, I will treat that period of time which Varro calls historical (*historicon*). He writes that there are three divisions of time periods, the first from the beginning of humankind to the last cataclysm,³⁹ which is called *adelon* ('unclear') because of our ignorance; the second from the previous cataclysm to the first Olympiad,⁴⁰ which is called mythical (*mythicon*) because many fabulous things (*fabulosa*) are told about it; the third from the first Olympiad to us, which is called historical, because the events in it are recorded in true histories (*veris historiis*).

(2) Whether the first period had a beginning or lasted from eternity, it is in any event clear that it cannot be ascertained how many years it lasted. The second cannot be plainly known, either, but it is believed to have been around 1700 years. From the previous cataclysm, which is called (the flood) of Ogygius, to the reign of Inachus, around 400 years are counted; from then to the destruction of Troy, 800 years, from then to the first Olympiad a little over 400; it is only the last that (sub-period), although it is still part of the mythical period, some have nevertheless sought to define more clearly, because it is closer to the memory of written (records). [...] (4) But about the third period, there has been a disparity of only six or seven years between different authorities.

On this view, the mythical period was not different from later times in itself, but is only less accessible; it was not, as in Ovid's account, a time when the gods dwelt on earth, later to abandon it. But there is an obvious weakness in Varro's account: historians did not begin to take Rome into account until several centuries after the beginning of the historical period. Accordingly, much of the prehistory and early history of Rome, including the story of Janus' kingship, occupies a murky intermediate position between what is clearly myth and what is clearly history.

Arguably, this is not the exception but the rule, and all ancient historians were forced to deal with boundary issues like this at least some of the time. The simplest way (again a type of

³⁹ A great destructive event that severed the continuity of traditions. There were a variety of opinions on how many such events had taken place and of what nature they were.

⁴⁰ Corresponding to 776 BCE, or thereabouts.

skeptical gullibility, if you will) was to put multiple possibilities out there without taking a stance (Plutarch, *Life of Numa* 19.5–6):⁴¹

(5) The first month, January, is so named from Janus. [...] (6) For this Janus, in remote antiquity, whether he was a demi-god or a king, was a patron of civil and social order, and is said to have lifted human life out of its bestial and savage state. For this reason he is represented with two faces, implying that he brought men's lives out of one sort and condition into another.

The appearance of Janus is interpreted symbolically, but Plutarch leaves it open whether Janus was really a demigod or a human, and thus avoids having to answer whether there ever were demigods dwelling on earth at all. He does, however, seem to exclude the possibility that the Janus who lived in Italy could have been a “full” god.⁴² This also harmonizes with the widespread idea that gods are worshipped in many or most places, and demigods, heroes or daemons only in one place or in a few.

A hard stance *against* the divinity of Janus and Saturn – not, however, against the existence of gods – was taken by the author of the *Origo Gentis Romanae* (‘Origins of the Roman People’), whose name is lost to us (*OGR* pr.–3.8):

(Preface) The origins of the Roman people, from the founders Janus and Saturn through the subsequent kings down to the tenth consulate of (emperor) Constantius, condensed from the authorities Verrius Flaccus and Antias [...], from the annals of the pontiffs, from Cincius, Egnatius, Veranius, Fabius Pictor, Licinius Macrus, Varro, Caesar, Tubero, and from the entire historiography (*historia*) of the ancients, down to what each of the recent authors (*neotericorum*) has said, that is, both Livius and Victor Afer.

(1.1) The first to have come to Italy (from abroad) is believed to have been Saturn, as the Muse of Maro⁴³ attests in these verses:

First from etherial Olympus came Saturn,
fleeing the arms of Jupiter, etc.

⁴¹ From the translation of the *Parallel Lives* by Bernadotte Perrin.

⁴² Plutarch's discussions of Janus in the *Roman Questions* lean more in the direction of making him human. 22.1: “Why do they suppose Janus to have been two-faced and so represent him in painting and sculpture?—Is it because, as they relate, he was by birth a Greek from Perrhaebia, and, when he had crossed to Italy and had settled among the savages there, he changed both his speech and his habits?—Or is it rather because he changed the people of Italy to another manner and form of life by persuading a people which had formerly made use of wild plants and lawless customs to till the soil and to live under organized government?”

41.1: “Why did their ancient coinage have stamped on one side a double-faced likeness of Janus, on the other the stern or the prow of a ship?—Is it, as many affirm, in honour of Saturn who crossed over to Italy in a ship?—Or, since this might be said of many, inasmuch as Janus, Evander, and Aeneas all landed in Italy after a voyage by sea, one might rather conjecture thus: some things are excellent for States, others are necessary; and of the excellent things good government is the chief, and of the necessary things facility of provision. Since, therefore, Janus established for them an ordered government by civilizing their life, and since the river, which was navigable and permitted transportation both from the sea and from the land, provided them with an abundance of necessities, the coinage came to have as its symbol the twofold form of the lawgiver, as has been stated, because of the change he wrought, and the vessel as the symbol of the river. [...]”

Both quotes taken from the translation by F. C. Babbitt, accessed via [Lacus Curtius](#). The *Roman Questions* are an extremely important text for the study of Roman religion, and by no means committed to interpreting the gods as historical humans. Plutarch is following the leads of earlier Roman authors in this.

⁴³ This is Vergilius Maro, or Vergil.

(2) But the ancient people⁴⁴ are said to have been so naive until those times that they thought foreigners who came to them were born of Heaven and Earth (*Caelo et Terra*), because they were equipped with knowledge and wisdom and contributed a little to the ordering of livelihoods and the formation of *mores* ('customs, morals'), and because they did not know their parentage or origins.⁴⁵ And not only did they believe this, but they also taught it to their offspring, as in the case of Saturn himself, who was said to have been the son of Heaven and Earth.

(3) But although this is the common opinion, it is a fact that Janus went to Italy first, and that he received Saturn, who came after him. (4) So we ought to understand that Vergil too was not ignorant of the ancient history, but in his style called Saturn "first", not because no one was there before him, but because he was of the first rank (*principem*). [Several parallels from Vergil are adduced.]

(2.1) But to return to our topic: they say that Creusa, the beautiful daughter of Erechtheus, king of the Athenians, was raped by Apollo, and that she gave birth to a boy and sent him to Delphi to be raised there, but that her father, who did not know about this, gave her in marriage to a certain Xuthus.⁴⁶ (2) When he was unable to have children with her, he went to Delphi to consult the oracle how he might become a father; then the god responded that he should adopt the one who would cross his path the next day. (3) In this way, he adopted the aforementioned by, who was begotten of Apollo, since he crossed his path. (4) But when he came of age, he was not content with the kingdom of his father, and went with a large fleet to Italy, occupied a mountain and founded a city there, naming it Janiculum after his own name.

(3.1) Then, when Janus was king among the simple and uncivilized indigenous people,⁴⁷ Saturn, who had come to Italy as a refugee from his own kingdom, was received with hospitality and founded a citadel, named Saturnia after himself, not far from Janiculum. (2) And he first taught agriculture and a settled lifestyle to the people who were wild and accustomed to live by banditry.⁴⁸ It is in accord with this that Vergil says in the eighth book (*Aeneid* 8.314–318):

The indigenous Fauns and Nymphs used to inhabit these places,
and a people of men born from tree trunks and hard wood,⁴⁹
who had no laws (*mos*) and no discipline (*cultus*), and who did not yoke bulls

⁴⁴ The autochthonous or indigenous population, which does not figure much in these narratives, because descent from Greek or Trojan heroes carried greater prestige (unlike in Athens, where people took great pride in their supposed autochthony).

⁴⁵ This idea lives on in the – false! – legend that the Aztecs welcomed the European conquistadors as gods.

⁴⁶ This follows more or less the plot of Euripides' play *Ion*, but he and his half-brothers Dorus and Achaeus (sons of Xuthus, not Apollo) are usually the ancestors of the three Greek "tribes", the Ionians (incl. Athenians), Dorians (incl. Spartans) and Achaeans. Our author or his source has dropped the brothers and identified Ion as Janus.

⁴⁷ The arrogance and misanthropy of the Roman discourse of "civilization" lives on in the dehumanizing anti-Indigenous rhetorics of modern settler-colonial states.

⁴⁸ Again, this smacks of the Roman discourse of "civilization" that contrasted themselves against "savage" peoples like the Gauls, the Huns, or the Goths (depending on the period). Who a whole country of "feral" bandits could have even been robbing from is not addressed.

⁴⁹ Our author is apparently conflating the indigenous Fauns and Nymphs (who are gods) with the indigenous Italians. That these latter are born from hard wood is perhaps meant as a metaphor primarily, but is at any rate based on an early Greek idea that humans originated from tree nymphs or trees.

and did not know to store away any of their possessions or leave a part over, but used to eat straight from the branches and from dead game.

(3) (Now Vergil) omitted Janus, who introduced nothing but the rituals (*ritum ... religionesque*) of worshiping the gods, and instead focused on Saturn, who [...] taught them the art of agriculture, [...] (when he said that Saturn was “first”).

(7) In fact because, as we said above, Janus arrived first, so when the people after both of their deaths decreed divine honors to both, they allotted the first place in all rituals (*sacris*) to Janus, to the extent that, when there is a sacrifice to other gods, Janus is named first over the incense offered on the altar, with the addition of the byname “father” (i.e. *Ianus pater*). [...] (9) And because he had a wonderful memory of past events, and also ... the future ... [Here the text has a gap, but this seems to be an explanation of Janus’ two-headed iconography, very similar to what Macrobius says in the next quotation.]

It is clear that the *Origo Gentis Romanae* is deeply invested in an image of the contemporaneous Romans as a civilized, superior and enlightened people, but despite the stark contrast against the naivety of the early Romans, the point is not to reject either the worship of Janus or the religious institutions established by Janus himself.⁵⁰ In fact, the meaning of rituals is completely subordinated to their historical origins here, and it is those ancient origins which give them authority, not their efficacy, which is not even discussed.

This is made explicit by Macrobius, a follower of the Platonic philosophy of Plotinus and Porphyry. He contrasts explanations of this type, which have reference to historical/mythical origins (or to natural philosophy, which will be discussed later), with those that actually touch on the “arcane/secret nature of a divinity” (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.7.18–23):

(18) It is permissible (*fas*) for me to talk openly about the origins of the (festival of) Saturnalia, not the one that has reference to the arcane nature of the divinity, but those which are mixed with fabulous elements or are published by the *physici* (‘natural philosophers, scientists’). For those reasons which are hidden (*occultas*) and which flow from the pure and true spring may not even be discussed during the rituals, but if anyone learns them, they are commanded to hold them hidden in their mind. [...]

(19) Janus obtained the region which is now called Italy as his kingdom. He – as is said by Hyginus, who follows Protarchus of Tralles – held this land together with Camese, a native like him, and they shared the power in such fashion that the region was called Camesene, the city Janiculum. (20) Later, the rule was contracted to Janus alone.

He is believed to have had a double face, so that he could see what was before and what was behind him; which is doubtless to be taken as a reference to the prudence and skill of the king, who knew past deeds and foresaw future events—just as the Romans worship Antevorta (‘turned ahead’) and Postvorta (‘turned back’) as companions of (this) divinity.

(21) This Janus received Saturn, who had come with a fleet, into his hospitality, and was taught about agriculture from him. Thus he improved his way of life, which had been

⁵⁰ Janus appears as a kind of mirror image of the second Roman king, Numa, who led no wars but established ceremonies and religious institutions.

wild and simple before he knew the crops, and rewarded Saturn by sharing his kingdom with him. **(22)** When